



COMMUNITY COMMENTS

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What Can We Do That Will Count?

BY ARTHUR E. MORGAN

Can an ordinary man find a generally available course which will effectively contribute to a sounder and saner society? This and another issue of COMMUNITY COMMENTS will deal with that subject.

I

Some elements of personality and character are inborn. Yet the kind of person one is, especially in his relations with others, is largely a matter of his bringing up.

A person reared in a family or a community in which the habit of deceit is nearly universal, and where no one trusts anyone, will acquire those traits as naturally as he learns the mother tongue. Since that has been the way of his world—the only world he has known—he naturally will assume it to be the way of the world in general. To him, anyone who thinks or acts otherwise is an impractical dreamer, or is simply unintelligent. As a rule years do not change such early acquired attitudes.

A person reared in a family and a community where full honesty, good faith and good will are nearly universal will naturally conclude that that is the way of the world.

Since a person's world seldom is all one way or all the other, a wise bringing up will recognize that fact, and will combine good will and honesty with accurate, realistic appraisal of things. Well brought up children will be characterized by good will, but not by credulity.

There is one way above all others by which a good pattern of motive, attitude and judgment may be established in the early years. This is by the continued intimate association of children with good parents and with a good community. If the community leaves much to be desired, then it is all the more essential that intimate family relationships be maintained. It is the general experience of sociologists that even a quite imperfect family structure is better than none.

Spiritual parentage in a community may be more important than biological. Persons, often without children of their own, who are true friends in the community, sometimes have more and better spiritual children than most natural parents.

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II

Neither government nor business nor any other human institution is impersonally administered. Men in authority try intuitively to make over their worlds to accord with their personal views of life. They see themselves as acting in accord with the real nature of things.

"An institution is the lengthened shadow of a man." This is true, except that usually more than one man contributes to the result.

Jay Gould, who in his day ruled the Western Union Telegraph Company and large railroad systems, corrupted everything he touched. The Bell Telephone System, as developed under Theodore Vail, had dignity and responsibility.

Such influence of individuals can be observed in politics, religion and education. I recall, shortly before Hitler's assumption of authority, a successful American business man saying that his coming to power could do little harm because German society was so stable that no single man could have much effect on it.

Traits of personal character which so influence and often dominate institutions, both those which are wholesome and those which are negative elements in the common life, are chiefly products of early influences, especially of the home and of the immediate intimate environment. Failure to take that fact into account is a chief cause of social ills.

III

Here are two major social facts: first, the fundamental character of a person usually is formed very early in life; and second, those in

position to influence events on a large or small scale tend intuitively to make over their world according to the patterns of their own characters.

Whoever lives most wisely, normally and intimately with his children today probably will be among those whose pattern of life most influences tomorrow. Whether the world of tomorrow will be weak or strong, good or bad, slovenly or orderly, is being determined by the homes and intimate communities of today. It is primarily there, rather than in government and institutions, that our fate lies.

IV

In view of these realities, the present situation in America is not very favorable. Recognizing many exceptions, in general the contacts of American parents with their children are becoming fewer and less intimate. Several powerful influences accentuate this trend.

Educational hierarchies are bent on reducing contacts of young children with home and community by means of consolidated schools, commonly outside the home community, and by denying the place of family and community as chief agency for transmitting basic culture.

This robbing children of home and community experience is not compensated for by any other fine relationships. Repudiation of normal friendly relationships between teachers and children commonly is extreme. Personal interviews with college freshmen from all parts of America disclose that in more than half the high schools evidence of high scholarship or of friendly relations with teachers is strongly resented.

Another interruption of the basic cultural tradition is different from anything in all human experience. Radio and television invade the home with mediocrity, often with more intimate acquaintance than that between parents and children.

As a still further break comes the custom of both husband and wife holding jobs outside the home. True, women should have full economic freedom. Before and after the rearing of children there are years of activity during which a woman should not be restricted by her sex in her occupational choice. Moreover, a young woman should have economic competence, so that her marriage shall result from free choice, and not be an escape from economic insecurity.

Yet such freedom is different from the attitude that it is more important to have two income earners in the family than to have the best possible home environment for children. An impressive list of big names in education and industry is signed to the report of the President's Committee on Education beyond High School, which states:

Greater encouragement must be given to women to carry on their education and training beyond high school. They are rich resources in the efforts to meet shortages in many occupations. There is need to train more women for careers, and still greater need for business and industry to accord women an equality of opportunity.

There is no hint in this report that work away from home by increasing millions of wives and

mothers, many of them with small children, may impair the cultural inheritance.

Yet another menace to our cultural heritage is the trend toward totalitarianism. Russia seems to be conquering America. The immature arrogance with which we have held everything Russian in contempt is now in panic reversed to an equally immature demand that we follow Russia in education, in bad manners and in infringement on personal freedom.

These several conditions adverse to the traditions of the best culture will continue to make more difficult the optimum rearing of children. It may almost seem that family and community are obsolete, and that a new basis must be found for human culture.

Yet, for reasons which seem the more conclusive the more fully they are understood, survival of the finest human qualities probably will continue to be through the intimate association of children with parents and community. Realization of this fact is essential to social understanding. In view of the many formidable obstacles to the full development of family and community life, how can the best of this cultural continuity be insured?

In all ages there have been crises in which the continuity of family patterns has seemed almost impossible, as in great invasions. Yet some families under extreme difficulty have persisted in preserving great family traditions and customs. The best efforts may fail, but many efforts improve the prospects, and who knows which seed will grow? In Elijah's day, it is writ-

ten, there were but seven thousand faithful in Israel. By what a narrow margin did the great Hebrew tradition survive!

As more and more families are sucked into the whirlpool of mediocre conformity, our culture will certainly be short in the leadership of sane, well balanced living. Those families and communities in which a great pattern of living is maintained in intimate association with their children will be the most promising sources for the cultural leadership of the future. (Not necessarily the temporary power leadership, which often rests largely on the average quality of the population.) That saving leadership most probably will be supplied by the families and communities that, in spite of all difficulties, have maintained a high degree of purpose and commitment, along with sanity.

All over America there are families, communities and individuals with strong commitment to the great cultural traditions of sincerity, considerateness, good will and human dignity, and who, if they can see the way, are ready to pay a great price to preserve and to extend those values. Under the adverse conditions which now exist, and which may be worse in the future, what practicable program can be offered them?

V

To meet the difficult conditions of today and tomorrow such family and community living must be consciously purposeful, persistent and intelligent, overcoming powerful compulsions to conform to mediocrity. Such families and commu-

nities must be "in the world, but not of it"; they must share the common life and fellowship, yet keep the pattern true.

Intensity of commitment is in constant danger of becoming dogmatism, zealotry or fanaticism. For safety from such distortion there must be full freedom for critical inquiry, which does not fear to examine and to reexamine every conviction and every tradition, as well as every conventional pattern. But liberalism must not be an excuse for lapsing into easy conformity and mediocrity. Only with discriminating freedom is there cultural security.

In any such design for family living through generations, the choice of mates becomes of high importance. Casualness in sex relations would be incongruous with such purpose.

It is in purposeful families and communities that the best of the future will be nurtured, notwithstanding any political or military events of the years just ahead. We are told that the appropriate U. S. Department of Defense agency estimates that a full blown atomic war might extinguish eighty per cent of our population, setting us back to the population of 1870. Even such an event would not greatly change the problem. It still would be necessary for the remaining families and communities of clear purpose and strong commitment to persist under very difficult circumstances to preserve and advance our best values, passing them on to their children and to the future through the intimate ties of wise and good homes and communities.

Men have found no other dependable way. Whoever considers "keeping up with the Joneses", by having both parents of young children income earners, to be more important than to help preserve and transmit the best of our cultural inheritance, will largely forfeit opportunity to contribute to that inheritance. Largely out of success achieved in personal transmission of such cultural traits as good will, brotherly love, honesty, courage, and sanity will emerge the future cultural leadership of mankind.

Men and women quite generally have it in their power to choose this course, though sometimes only by heroic, intelligent, imaginative and persistent purpose can they largely succeed. It is not necessary to wait "for Congress to pass a law", or to get the support of an institution or a foundation before embarking on this, the greatest, but one of the least appreciated, careers of the ages.

Youth is by far the best time to acquire the necessary discipline and pattern of living. If our days seem dull it is not because they have not presented live issues, but because we have surrendered to those issues without a fight.

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ELEANOR SWITZER

After sixteen years as Secretary of Community Service, Inc., Miss Eleanor Switzer resigned in September, 1957, to become associated with the Yellow Springs News. During that long period she has largely administered the current affairs of the organization, especially during my extended absences in Finland, India, Africa, and our own country. During those periods Griscom Morgen edited Community Service News, handled many inquiries, and assisted in administration.

While hers has usually been the only paid services of Community Service, Inc., she has taken far less than the compensation she could have commanded in private employment. She is co-operating in introducing her successor to the work.

Miss Switzer has become somewhat of an institution in Yellow Springs, where she is called upon for many kinds of help. She has a conviction that community must begin in intimate human relationships and mutual helpfulness. Repeatedly she has been the spiritual mainstay of persons in trouble. Her new work brings her into touch with all elements of the community in ways which give practical expression to this ability to be of service.

We wish it were possible to give more adequate material recognition to Miss Switzer for her long years of competent and devoted work for Community Service. Possibly someone may find it possible to turn this wish into reality.

The Yellow Springs News, with which Miss Switzer is now associated, is a rare thing among newspapers. Entirely free from any political, economic or other commitments, it serves the community with a devotion and competence which are exceptional. The little group of men and women who own and run the paper work hard, live economically, and maintain a high standard of civic responsibility. The paper has been cited repeatedly by the State Newspaper Association for its excellence, and as this is written there is news of a new citation.

Mrs. Dorothy Gross, our new Secretary, was previously Secretary to the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association. She has experience in office practice and administration, and has personal interest and enthusiasm for the work of Community Service. Her husband, Bernard Gross, a member of the staff of the Antioch Bookplate Company, also has long and active interest in community and related affairs.

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WHAT CAN A MAN DO ?

We speak of foreordained purpose in the creation as the plant is inherent in the seed. But we do not find complete finality in the seed, because radiation, or heat, or chemicals such as colchicine, may cause mutations in the growing seed. As human purpose grows from its seed, it is subject to change by man's objective inquiry and research, by his appraisals and his aspirations. Man's purpose and aspirations may create new elements in the pattern.

—Arthur E. Morgan, SEARCH FOR PURPOSE

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